

Evangelism That Empowers The Poor

(A Study Case of the Poor in Gereja Masehi Injili di Timor – East Nusa Tenggara)

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Abstrak

Paper ini ditulis untuk menelaah pandangan Alkitab tentang pekabaran Injil yang bersifat membangun bagi mereka yang miskin. Mereka yang miskin dalam konteks tulisan ini adalah jemaat dalam Gereja Masehi Injili di Timor yang terletak di di Nusa Tenggara Timur (NTT). Mayoritas penduduk NTT adalah orang miskin dan oleh karena itu GMIT sebagai gereja mayoritas di NTT memiliki banyak anggota yang juga adalah kaum miskin. Ada kebutuhan dalam GMIT untuk mampu menyentuh mereka yang miskin dalam sistem pekabaran Injilnya. Tulisan ini terbagi atas tiga bagian yaitu bagian pertama berisi deskripsi tentang siapa yang dimaksud dengan orang miskin dan mengapa orang miskin penting bagi gereja, bagian yang kedua berisi analisa tentang model-model pekabaran injil yang berguna bagi mereka yang miskin di GMIT, dan bagian terakhir berisi analisa tentang pemanfaatan nilai-nilai kearifan lokal di NTT (khususnya suku Timor) dalam pelayanan pekabaran Injil bagi mereka yang miskin. Strategi yang (mungkin) tepat untuk pekabaran injil di GMIT adalah church-centered dengan model Jesus's way of life di dalam kitab-kitab Injil dengan penyesuaian terhadap nilai budaya NTT.

Kata kunci: GMIT, Kemiskinan, Pekabaran injil.

The church Gereja Masehi Injili di Timor (GMIT) was founded in 1947 on one of the island in East Nusa Tenggara called Timor Island.¹ The East Nusa Tenggara region is consider by the Indonesian government as one of the areas that has serious poverty issues of its own due to economic and physical isolation. GMIT as a church is enriched with different ethnicities and cultures on Timor Island and some other islands nearby. Even today GMIT stands still with more than 1,000,000 members in around 2000 churches in Indonesia. As a growing church, GMIT faces challenges related to economic and social lives of the people.

Where Things Stand Now

Who are the poor and what is the importance of the poor in our life? This is the main question that will be answered in this section. In order to explore the concept and

¹ "Profil Gereja di Indonesia," <http://profilgereja.wordpress.com/2010/05/06/gereja-masehi-injili-di-timor/> (Accessed December 12, 2013).

reality of the poor there is a need to understand the reality of poverty in Asia in general and in East Nusa Tenggara in particular before the exploration of the model(s) of evangelism for the poor who live there starts.

Who are the Poor?

What is the meaning of the poor? According to *Consultation on World Evangelism* (COWE) report, the poor refers to:

The manual worker who struggles to survive on a day to day basis, the destitute cowering as the beggar; the one reduced to meekness, the one brought low...those weak and tired from carrying heavy burdens, the leper and very often the common people...the majority of references indicate that the poor are the mercilessly oppressed, the powerless, the destitute, the downtrodden...but the poor tended to remain faithful to God.²

The life of the poor is characterized by dependency and oppression. The Poor, especially in the third world, are often those who live in an underdeveloped area. Therefore, sometimes poverty is attributed to the poor who live in areas where development hasn't reached. On the other hand, the poor in the third world can also be those who live in the "development" areas or "modernized" areas but are deprived by it because technology has made their traditional skills useless.

Why the Poor?

Poverty and poor people are the reality that we face worldwide. It is the reality that diminishes people's ability to create a better future for themselves and for their community. In August 2008, the World Bank presented a major overhaul to their estimates of global poverty. The World Bank noted that "the incidence of poverty in the world is higher than past estimates have suggested."³ Since 2000, The United Nations promoted what they call The Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) with one of the goals to eradicate extreme poverty and hunger. The aim of the MDGs is to encourage development by improving social and economic conditions in the world's poorest countries. "The MDGs asserts that every individual has the right to dignity, freedom, equality, a basic standard of living that includes freedom from hunger and violence, and

² Vinay Samuel and Chris Sugden, ed., *Evangelism and the Poor: A Third World Study Guide* (Oxford: Regnum Books, 1987), 2-3.

³ "Global Issues," <http://www.globalissues.org/article/4/poverty-around-the-world> (accessed April 20, 2012).

encourages tolerance and solidarity."⁴ The goals were made to achieve these ideas by setting targets and indicators for poverty reduction in order to achieve the rights set forth in the Declaration on a set fifteen-year timeline.

Indonesia itself is one of the countries that predicted to be free from poverty in 2015, one year from now. As a country, Indonesia survived the financial crisis in 1997 and according to the economic growth report in Indonesia, a gradual reduction has happened in overall poverty in the country falling from 17 per cent in 2004 to 13 per cent in early 2010. But despite this fact, people who are poor are now in a worse situation than before. Only half the population of the citizens lives above the national poverty line. Problems such as maternal mortality, child malnutrition, and lack of access to education still existed among the poor of Indonesia.⁵ Women and children are the most vulnerable subject to poverty.

In the Eastern part of Indonesia, poverty is most severe because 95 percent of people there are considered poor by the United Nations standards' of poor people.⁶ The East Nusa Tenggara health agency reported in 2009 that there are more than 12,600 children (5 years old and under) who are malnourished and more than 25 youngsters had died from malnutrition.⁷ The health agency also stated that the high number of mortality around childbirth. When an infant survive from childbirth he or she will still in danger of health problems, such as malaria, malnutrition, tuberculosis, respiratory infections and dehydration (2009).⁸

All of this data is important to show why the reality of the poor and poverty needs to be seriously addressed not only by the government but also by the church. Church, in this case GMIT as the biggest church in East Nusa Tenggara need to develop a method of evangelism that touches the needs of the poor. Poverty is not a fate; it can be change by

⁴ "The Millennium Development Goals," United Nations Report (New York: United Nations, 2005), <http://unstats.un.org/unsd/mi/pdf/mdg%20book.pdf> (accessed April 20, 2012).

⁵ "Rural Poverty in Indonesia," <http://www.ruralpovertyportal.org/web/guest/country/home/tags/indonesia> (accessed April 20, 2012).

⁶ Nivell Rayda, "Corruption Causes Poverty and Hunger In East Nusa Tenggara, Claim Activists." *Jakarta Globe*, May 09, 2010. <http://www.thejakartaglobe.com/home/corruption-causes-poverty-and-hunger-in-east-nusa-tenggara-claim-activists/374099> (accessed April 20, 2012).

⁷ Nivell Rayda, "Corruption Causes Poverty".

⁸ Nivell Rayda, "Corruption Causes Povert".

people realizing that they can find the power to fight and to get out from the circle of poverty.

Where We Want To Go

There is a need to explore the concept of the poor in the Bible and to find the model(s) of evangelism that is contextual and able to empower the poor who are part of the church community.

The Poor in the Bible

In the Bible there are many passages that discuss the poor: the cry of the poor in Psalms; the prophets' declaration that God is on the side of the poor; the good news for the poor in the Gospels (Exodus 22: 21-24; Leviticus 19, 25; Psalms 10, 146; Isaiah 5; and Luke 4: 16 – 5: 32, 6: 33-36, 14: 12-14).⁹ There are at least two different ways to understand God's relationship with the poor¹⁰: the first is by seeing the poor as objects to God's salvation. Here the poor are seen as people who needed repentant like all of us. God's intention to save the poor is in line with the church's mission to bring God's redemption for human sin and therefore the poor should be one of the priorities in the church's mission. The second is by seeing the poor as subjects to God's salvation. In this perspective, the poor are agents in God's plan of salvation. We find this type of message in the Bible where Jesus asked the rich to become the poor in order to be his disciple. In his letters, Paul taught that God work actively through the life of poor, weak, and foolish.

In the Old Testament there are five Hebrew words that are use to describe the condition of the poor:

a. *Chaser*: lack of; inadequacy

For example in Job 30:3 and Deuteronomy 28:57 where poverty means lacking of bread and water. For the poor there is always a gap between what they need and what they have.

b. *Yarash*: dispossession

⁹ Samuel, 3.

¹⁰ Samuel, 11-13.

For example in Samuel 12:1-4 which is the story about the rich man with many flocks and the poor man with one lamb that shows David's arrogant action of possession.

c. *Dal*: frailty and weakness

For example in Genesis 41:9, 2 Samuel 3:1, and Jeremiah 5:4 where the poor are frail and weak in front of the ruler. The poor are subject to any kind of exercise of power with no defense system.

d. *Ebyon*: dependence

For example in Hannah's song, Amos 4:1, and Isaiah 25:4.

e. *Ani*: oppressed

For example in Deut 21:14; 22:29, and Jud 19:24 where the word *Ani* means subdue, violate, domination, and violation.¹¹

In the New Testament Jesus always approached the poor with compassion. The Gospel is the good news for the poor. Jesus shows that His mission was to take care of the poor. If the church's mission in the world is to reach the unreached groups such as the poor then the church need to put the poor as their main concern. It is important to give more attention to the poor because Jesus himself announced the good news for the poor.¹² The poor is important because their religious experience is unique since most of the time they are weak, oppressed, own nothing, they relies their life on faith and religion. Therefore the poor have a particularly different religious experience comparing to those who are not poor.

Biblical Model(s) of Evangelism for the Poor

A model is a framework of approaches that structures our basic understanding. According to a theologian, Michael Amaladoss, there are three models of evangelism that can be use in addressing the reality of the poor. The first model of evangelism is Church-centered. In this model the goal of evangelism is to build up the church. "The theological focus is on the historical Jesus, who is the incarnate Word and who founded the church as the means of salvation and who sent it out into the world on mission."¹³

¹¹ Samuel, 34-43.

¹² Samuel, 1.

¹³ Michael Amaladoss, *Making All Things New: Dialogue, Pluralism, and Evangelization in Asia* (New York: Orbis Books, 1990), 111.

Promoting the good news for the poor is the major activity of mission. Other activities in the church are additional tools in order to care for the poor.

The second model of evangelism is world-centered. "Pluralism is a fact of present experience, rooted not only in the differences of nature, but also in the diversity of cultures that are the fruits of the creative activity of peoples. Differences among human groups are a result of the varying gifts of the Creator."¹⁴ The tool that can be use to practice this model is dialogue. Dialogue is the principal activity of world-centered evangelization.

The third model is reign-of-God-centered. "The diversity of people and religions is recognized. The unique intervention of God in Jesus Christ is also acknowledged. Evangelization centered on the Kingdom is dynamic, future oriented, rooted in reality and history, integrative and holistic."¹⁵ In this, evangelism leads to a final fulfillment in God's kingdom. Life looks not to the past, nor to the present but to the future.

From these three models, the first model which is "church centered" fit the most with the context of the poor in GMIT because this model puts the poor as the main concern in the church mission. The poor are important enough to be the main concern in the church mission, especially the poor who are members of the church, because helping them is the same as helping the church to grow.

A different approach presented by a missiologist, Frances S. Adeney, stated that in considering which Biblical models of evangelism to choose, one need to pay attention to several important things such as understanding the model in its original context, examination of the current context, adaption of the evangelism model that best fits the current context, and finally how to apply the model without attacking other ways of doing evangelism.¹⁶ Following these steps, I will start by analyzing the Biblical model of evangelism in its original context using parts the Gospels in the New Testament as an example. In John 14:18, 22-23 we read "As you have sent me into the world, so I have sent them into the world ... the glory that you have given me I have given them, so that

¹⁴ Amaladoss, *Making All*, 111.

¹⁵ Amaladoss, *Making All*, 111-12.

¹⁶ Frances S. Adeney, *Graceful Evangelism: Christian Witness in a Complex World* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2010), 123.

they may be one, as we are one, I in them and you in me, that they may become completely one, so that the world may know that you have sent me and have loved them even as you have love me." This passage shows that Jesus sent His followers to be the witness of God in our life just like God has sent Him to the world. From John we read that when the disciples were gathered for Passover meal, Jesus washed their feet and by doing that reminded the disciples that He was sent by God to be the model of a servant. "This passage opens the Christian call to evangelism to all the methods used by Jesus himself to minister others and convince others to follow the Christian way."¹⁷ When Jesus' way of life becomes guidance in the life of the believers, their lives will shine for others goodness.

Throughout the Bible, especially in the New Testament, there are many passages that remind Christians to be the witness of Christ throughout the practices of their daily life. By practicing the life that Christians are called to be, they are practicing evangelism.¹⁸ In practicing the Christian life by modeling Jesus' way of life, Christians are also called to erase all types of oppression that they encounter in their daily life. Doing evangelism means bringing freedom for people who are in oppression and live under different types of tyranny. If Christians are committed to practice the call of God in our life then they should be brave enough to do as Luke writes in chapter 4:18-19 "the Spirit of the Lord is on me, because God has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. God has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight to the blind, to release the oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor." The time has come for Christians to do evangelism by working against many forms of injustice in this world and one way to do it is to build a strategy of evangelism for the poor. Based on the argument above, modeling Jesus's live is a strategy that can be use to achieve the goal of evangelism for the poor.

Strategy of Evangelism for the Poor in GMIT: Evangelism that empowers the Poor and respects the culture

In facing the poverty in East Nusa Tenggara, modeling Jesus' way of life can be practice as a part of the church-centered approach as explained before. Modeling Jesus's

¹⁷ Adeney, *Graceful Evangelism*, 21.

¹⁸ Adeney, *Graceful Evangelism*, 22.

way of life is not a new idea for GMIT, in fact it is stated in the mission of GMIT as a church. Unfortunately even with the knowledge of it, GMIT failed to put the poor as the subjects in the church. Most of the time, the poor were seen as objects and burden to the church. The poor are not the agent from God who plays an important role in the life of the church; the poor are still seen as those who contribute the least of all the church members. The poor are the second-class member of the church. A church-centered approach respects the poor as subject who is loved by God and whose role is important. In this approach of evangelism, the poor should be freed from their second-class membership and be fully accepted as subject in church's mission. In time of colonialism, the Portuguese saw all the indigenous in the church as the second-class church's member. Today, it is still the reality in the church except it is now the poor who are treated as the second-class church's member. Christians in East Nusa Tenggara need to learn that not recognizing the "legacy" of colonialism, even after the Portuguese were gone is an erroneous. It is inapposite because Jesus had already freed everyone when He died on the Cross including Christians in East Nusa Tenggara from this new form of colonialism. With this kind of awareness Christians in East Nusa Tenggara will find empowerment to fight the lifetime poverty that has wrapped them. Christians in East Nusa Tenggara need to understand that everyone should be treated equally and that everyone play an important role in the church because Jesus enabled them to do so; that they are as good as everybody else; that they are as intelligent as any person can be; and that they have a rich culture and tradition that they can be proud of. These are facts that somehow escape their awareness because of the experience of colonialism. It does not take too much of a socio historical analysis to realize that the socio economic poverty in East Nusa Tenggara is to a considerable extent the result of Asia's colonial history.¹⁹ Colonialism itself was one stage of evangelism where Christianity travels to the new world with economic exploitation.²⁰ Christianity in East Nusa Tenggara suffered from Portugal-Spain, Holland-Britain, and Japanese colonialism. Christianity that was planted by colonialists with their own agenda did contribute to the confusion of identity for Christians in Indonesia.

¹⁹ Ogbu U. Kalu, Peter Vethanayagamony, Edmund Kee-Fook Chia, ed., *Mission after Christendom: Emergent Themes in Contemporary Mission* (Louisville: John Knox Press, 2010), 149.

²⁰ Adeney, *Graceful Evangelism*, 40.

With a strong acknowledgement and respect to their own self and cultural identity, Christians in East Nusa Tenggara must live a life that practices what Jesus teaches. No one will ever be free from the chain of oppression if they do not realize the forms of oppression in the first place. Naming the oppressors is one step toward freedom. Poverty is a form of injustice and Christians in East Nusa Tenggara need to fight it by developing all resources that they have. Christians in East Nusa Tenggara need to develop their capability in economic areas (doing this with awareness that the overall economic and power structures remain unjust). East Nusa Tenggara is not a poor region although people might think so in their first visit. For example it is one of the areas that produce high quality meat in Indonesia and this can be developed to increase the living standards of the people who live there.

GMIT as a church in East Nusa Tenggara should work on practicing the model of evangelism that empowers the poor. When ministers preach they should preach on the freedom from poverty that Jesus brought for the people in their real life and not only in the life after death. GMIT need to arrange programs, trainings, support groups, etc that will think and work for the development of local products in order to support the members of congregations that live in poverty. When it is time to serve Eucharist, it is no longer enough for ministers to say that Jesus had died for us, because the congregations need to hear that Jesus has risen and therefore they are now called to do something in that resurrection that will create changes in real life. GMIT must pay attention to the problem of malnutrition of women and children, especially because they are the majority in the church's membership. There are many other programs and activities that can be done only if GMIT's leaders and members of congregation realize the call that Jesus has for them, which is to live for others, to share love, to support, to make sure that no one is still living under oppression.

GMIT as a part of *Dewan Gereja-gereja se-Indonesia-DGI* (Communion of Churches in Indonesia) is not a church without knowledge of the call to witness and proclaim the good news for the poor. The communion of churches in Indonesia in their mission states that "churches in Indonesia affirm that the Gospel is the Good News, solid, and comprehensive for all creatures, for human kind and the environment. The whole Gospel needs to be proclaimed to all human kind because the Gospel is entirely related to human life, not only to the coming life in heaven but to the present life in this

world; it does not only regard the soul or spirit, but also human wholeness and existence, both spiritual and political, social, economical, and cultural.”²¹ This mission is so good it is almost impossible to be practice. This mission was read once after GMIT’s leaders signed the ‘mission agreement’ and that was all, it is never been socialized anywhere else in GMIT. The members of the church suffered from the ‘unknowing’ that later on developed into the feeling of ‘not owning’ the church. This is crucial because when we think we do not own something precious then we will not give enough attention to it. And that is what happens with the mission of DGI in GMIT.

Evangelism that empowers the poor while respecting the culture should be an evidence of God’s liberating activity in the life of GMIT. GMIT’s leaders and members need to ‘see’ the un-justice reality with magnificent building of their churches on the one hand and poverty in the life of the congregation on the other hand. People in GMIT need to be free from their way of understanding that ‘it is okay to live a poor life as long as my church is rich.’ They need to learn to see that the church is the representation of who they are and what they believe. The expensive church surely does not represent their identity and what Jesus teaches in the Bible. Justice calls for deliverance from oppression. In this case one of the oppressors is the Christians in East Nusa Tenggara own way of thinking.

How to Get There Together

After the exploration of the concept of the poor in the Bible, Biblical models of evangelism and how it will empower the life of the poor in East Nusa Tenggara, it is now the time to understand how GMIT can change. GMIT should change from only ‘a church in East Nusa Tenggara’ into ‘a church of East Nusa Tenggara’; a church that brings restoration to the community by empowering the poor.

Restoration of the Community: The Round house as God’s house

Local people with local awareness can only do the most effective evangelism in GMIT because only they can really understand and work within their social context. Practicing what Jesus teaches in our daily life means working for those who are poor

²¹ Claudia Wahrisch-Oblau and Fidon Mwombeki, ed., *Mission Continuous: Global Impulses for the 21st Century* (Oregon: WIPF and STOCK Publishers, 2010), 255.

inside and outside the church. According to the Bible, caring for the poor is exactly like helping God (Proverbs 19:17; 14:31). Jesus in Matthew made it clear that 'whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did for me (Mat 25:40).' Therefore, the task of evangelism that empowers the poor could start from developing the local church through the process of interaction and involvement. These activities in the context hopefully will be able to bring empowerment to the people. Interaction and involvement with GMIT produces serious attention to the needs of the poor. Interaction and involvement are mutual. It requires the willingness to admit that one does not have all the answers, that one's own knowledge has limits. Interaction and involvement are a communal exploration with openness. By doing these, GMIT will have a chance to discover its identity and at the same time give more attention to the challenges of the poor.

As for the building of the churches, GMIT can learn from the richness of their culture. As an alternative to a great and fancy Westernized church building, perhaps a model of the houses of the Timor people can be used instead. Timor's home is in a shape of a round house. This house has a particular position in the world of the Timor people. An anthropologist, Clark E. Cunningham stated that:

"The house is a ritual centre for prayer, sacrifice and feasts. Ritual of the life-cycle (birth, marriage, house-building, and death) is conducted normally at the house of those immediately involved, and sacred heirlooms are kept there. Houses (with their sacra) should endure; heirs should maintain them and eventually inhabit them. Prayers may be directed from the house to the Divinity (*Uis Neno*), the Powers (*pah meni*), the ancestors (*nitu*), and to special tutelary spirits. Sorcery may be initiated from (the house and victims are often (in my experience) affected there, and diviners (*mnane*) normally work at the houses of clients."²²

Houses for people in East Nusa Tenggara are more than just a place to live. They are symbolic of their understanding of their social and world structures. For one ethnic group, the Atoni ethnic in Timor, their house consists of two different parts. The first part is the house to live (*ume kbubu*), and the second part is the house to accept guests

²² Clark E. Cunningham, *Order in the Atoni House* (Leiden: KITLV, 1964), <http://kitlv.library.uu.nl/index.php/btlv/article/viewFile/2666/3427> (accessed May 01, 2012).

(lopo).²³ The first house that is built is always ume kbubu. People never build a lopo first especially when they don't have ume kabubu yet.²⁴ Ume kbubu or the round house is the place to live for the family. It is called round house because the shape is round like an egg. The roof of the round house is made with dried grass that covers all parts of the house. There is only one door in the round house. The door is small and placed really low so that to get into the house people have to bow. This was meant to keep the warm inside the house, especially to keep the temperature safe for the food (corn and rice) that were stored inside the house. Usually there is a fire 24 hours a day inside the house. It is important to remember that the round house is a house for family. Only members of the family can get in and out easily. To get in and out people have to bend to show respect to the leader of the house and to the Owner of life-God.²⁵

The fancy and expensive church buildings in East Nusa Tenggara do not represent the richness of the culture of Timor people. The side effect is clear, members of GMIT do not see the connection between the church and their culture (real life); therefore, they don't think the church should do anything with their condition of life, especially poverty. Again a contextual evangelism needs to help people to see how valuable their culture is and help them to incorporate it in their Christian life. Churches in East Nusa Tenggara should be built as the round houses where family of God gathers and praises God, where food for the members are kept warm and where everyone has to bend before entering it in order to respect God the owner of the house.

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²³ Ebenhaizer Nuban Timo, *Pemberita Firman Pencinta Budaya* (Jakarta: PT BPK Gunung Mulia, 2001), 57.

²⁴ Nuban Timo, *Pemberita Firman*, 57.

²⁵ Nuban Timo, *Pemberita Firman*, 57.

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